

A Summary Review of *Confucius for Christians:* *What an Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ*

[*Confucius for Christians: What an Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ*](#) by [Gregg Ten Elshoff](#) is important for many reasons and deserves a wide readership. It dispels the belief that many (most?) Christians hold about eastern religions; that they are dangerous and to be avoided at all costs. By gleaning principles taught in *The Analects* by Confucius, it offers sound and often overlooked or unrecognized angles from which to view Christian discipleship. Below are highlights that struck me as significant to these ends. More insights will follow in subsequent posts.

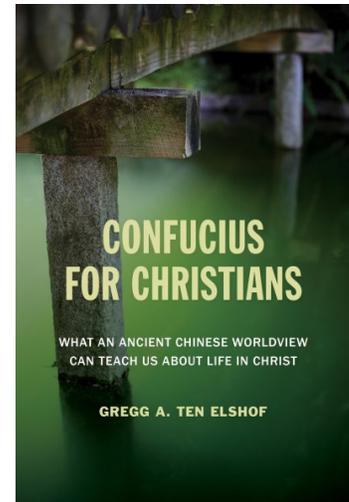
The book is broken into the categories of family, learning, ethics, ritual, and Sam (illustrating the importance of a person-centered world view). Each takes a reading from *The Analects* and unpacks the practical importance of it in light of being a Christ-follower.

Chapter 1 is a brief introduction and defense of using Confucian teachings as a framework for discovering a deeper way of following Christ. Missional efforts by Western Christians have (for too long) taken the Christian message and infused it with a mindset that is pregnant with historically conditioned, culturally-biased assumptions that the East (and our increasingly secular Western culture) do not share. The notion of finding common ground that reflects Christian teaching is all but ignored or eschewed. Ten Elshoff insists rather that Confucianism, like Christianity, is one of the great wisdom traditions that can help us become “scientists of the good life.” We must “mine the great traditions of sincere human reflection on the human condition for anything that can be of assistance in our attempt to understand deeply who we are, how our world works, and how best to fulfill the biblical mandate to promote human flourishing” (p 7).

Chapter 2 begins the first topic: family. This chapter alone, in my opinion, is worth the price of the book. With the bar raised high by Ten Elshoff’s especially insightful book *I Told Me So* (my review [here](#)), I expected this topic to hit another home run. There was no disappointment as this is full of thoughtful and provocative advice. It gave me much to mull over and generated a great deal of reflection on my family life and on that of my extended family. I can only scratch the surface, but will try to encapsulate what impacted me most.

Flourishing as a human entails growth in our ability to be together. Rather than being an isolated, customized, privatized human whose essential identity is wrapped around being a self-expressing individual, we must “attend to the roots” of our existence, which are found in “filial piety” and a sense of community as illustrated by our Trinitarian God after whose image we are made. We are not designed to be alone ([Gen 2:18](#)). Our human vocation, summed by Jesus in loving God and others (p 10; cf., [Matt 22:37-29](#)), is also our identity as a “being-in-relationship.” In fact, “a life devoid of significant and well-ordered relationships can no more be human than can an organism devoid of a root system be a tree” (p 12). Consequently, “the family is the primary venue for growth into the full expression of being human,” since it is here that “one learns how properly to negotiate the power dynamics” we encounter throughout life. From our family “we acquire the building blocks for navigating the wildly complex relational networks that comprise human society” (pp 13-14).

Implications abound. For example, how well I “negotiate the power dynamics” in my workplace, neighborhood, church, et al. is directly related to how well I execute my role as husband, father, and



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grandfather. Falling short in one arena will prove compromising in other arenas. Succeeding in the one facilitates my success in the others.

Ten Elshof goes further by noting how parents (especially in the West) not only approve but even insist that a milestone in maturity is autonomy. A son or daughter (typically between the ages of 19-21) “graduate from a life of submission” and, it is assumed, is fully prepared to “weigh in the balance all of the considerations that make for responsible life-making and to strike out on one’s own” (p 15). And yet, for the Christian, there is never a time in which one graduates from a life of submission. After all, our state in heaven will be spent in eternal submission. Therefore, “if this life is to be a sort of training for the life to come, we don’t do ourselves any favors by encouraging our youth into a life of autonomy...We would do better to train them to be good sons and daughters” (p 15). Of course, this applies equally to being a brother, cousin, grandparent, et al. What we find in the West are many adults asserting they have nothing to do with this or that family member and our typical response is “who doesn’t have this problem?”, as if this were normal (p 19). Abandoning the investment in one’s family has far-reaching consequences. After all, it’s the same heart from which love of family and love for others flows. No surprise, Ten Elshof observes:

We’re trying to establish significant and healthy relationships with friends, neighbors, superiors, and the world without having made much progress in the mastery of the basic relational dynamic given us insofar as we are fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, older and younger siblings, and spouses. We’re tempted to think that we can somehow manage to love the world without having learned to love well those whom have been given to us as family (p 19).

Extending the notion of “family,” Ten Elshof highlights that familial terms are repeatedly used in the New Testament to apply to members of our faith communities (“brother”). Thus, we have filial obligation beyond our biological family and must avoid “clannish exclusivity” (which is the context from which Jesus’s harsh statement emerges; cf., [Lk 14:26](#)).

The family is “God’s gift” to us and neglect of its significance only inhibits our ability to show love for others. I would argue that even one’s own self-love is compromised, since “you cannot extend what you have not yet acquired” (p 26).

Finally, one “blunt reminder” and an exhortation wraps up this chapter. “God is not your father. Your dad is your father” and, though Ten Elshof is not unsympathetic to the often painful adjustments required in our approach to family, “your flesh-and-blood parents [and siblings] have been given to you in order for you to learn the dynamics of filial piety and submission appropriate to a son or daughter” (p 26). From the Confucian emphasis to “attend to the root” of our essential being-in-relationship, we’re called to reverse the notion that growing as a Christian will make us a better father/mother, husband/wife, son/daughter. Instead we’re exhorted to recognize that there’s a sense in which being a better father/mother, husband/wife, son/daughter will help us grow into a better Christian (pp 27-28).

With tools like Google, social media, smart phones, etc., learning is no longer requisite for obtaining knowledge. Just one click of the mouse, one stroke of the keyboard, or one tap on the screen and an answer to our query is almost instantaneous. There is no striving, no process; only input/output. The irony is more than obvious that in our obsession with knowledge we inadvertently diminish the value of learning. In [Confucius for Christians](#) Gregg Ten Elshof contends — and as a former

A Summary Review of Confucius for Christians: What an Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ

educator I can affirm — that many in the West put far too much weight on obtaining knowledge at the expense of learning.

Fundamental to chapter 3 is the principle that while knowledge may give us a sense of completion, it is learning that gives us a sense of fulfillment. To be fulfilled is part of what it means to be fully human. Thus, learning is essential to a full human experience. Confucius insists and Jesus intimates that everyone who invests in their own learning will be paid far more dividends than the meager yield of possessing knowledge (Analects 7.8; [Matt 13:13](#)). While it's easy to love knowledge because it gives a sense of power, control, independence, completion, satisfaction, and attention from others, these qualities are the opposite of learning. Learning is harder to love because it does not yield the “cognitive satisfaction” of knowledge.

One cannot love learning and not also love humility. Ten Elshof astutely observes that learning leaves us with a sense of “incompletion, dependence, uncertainty, impotence, submission, and the power-down position of following” (pp 31-32). Clearly no one's heart is endeared naturally to these aspects of learning nor does anyone celebrate them, yet it is a “power-down position of following” that is at the heart of the Christ-follower. Indeed, from the beginning every human was designed to be in this state of eternal submission to the Creator. To pursue a reversal of this or even to minimize it is a sign of our fallenness. Power, control, independence, completion, satisfaction, and attention from others are not necessarily virtues to be exalted or flags to be waved by some aspiring leader, but are instead potential vices that need to be brought under the rule and reign of God. In fact, leadership is only accidental to the Christian Way, since every disciple of Christ is called to be a follower (p 40).

Embracing the qualities of a learner — incompletion, dependence, uncertainty, impotence, submission, and the power-down position of following — is nicely illustrated by marriage. Ten Elshof invites us to imagine having a “Knowledge Button” that a couple presses and instantly each spouse knows all there is to know about the other. What is lost is the process of discovery and any consequent spontaneity and emotion; those “Ah ha!” moments when we learn something new about the other. These moments often give rise to a dynamic exchange that, in the end, creates a deeper intimacy. Instead, the Knowledge Button steals those unexpected moments where growing closer over time is not possible. Worse, if one already knows all there is about the other there would be nothing to discuss! Genuine human love, therefore, “resists comprehensive knowledge of the other” (pp 35-37) and embraces the journey of learning about the other, which is more valuable than any sense of arrival brought on by knowledge.

A Confucius approach to learning is balanced. It is a quest for knowledge that “respects the authority of secured knowledge handed down from the past. But it recognizes the need for fresh thinking and new perspectives if that knowledge is to find expression, articulation, and useful application” (p 38). It's no surprise that many Western Christ-followers are enamored by one of two poles, either “fresh thinking and new perspectives” or the “secured knowledge handed down from the past” and both sides seem blind to the value found in the mean between the extremes. A mature learner, however, will identify which pole one leans into and make necessary adjustments toward balance. For example, others with whom you disagree are “in a fairly good position to tell you” which side you err. Add to that an intentional pursuit of an opposing pole also serves as a helpful corrective. And, of course, an occasional pause in acquiring new knowledge is wise in order to apply what is already known.

A Summary Review of *Confucius for Christians:* *What an Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ*

In sum, “to love learning, we must learn to love and embrace its earliest stages. Otherwise we’ll lose sight of the beauty of learning in our love affair with its fruit, the fulfillment of knowledge” (pp 44-45). I conclude this section with where Ten Elshof began (p 29):

The Master said, “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to interact him again.” Analects 7.8

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

In many respects, chapter 4, “Ethics,” is preliminary. It does not “nail down” specifics or offer air-tight rules to live by. Instead it presents a framework in which to contextualize the behavior of a Christ-follower. Ten Elshof argues we should not seek to codify Jesus’s moral teachings with ever-increasing specificity lest we become like the Pharisees and Sadducees that he condemned. As in the Confucius Way, a disciple of Jesus will “respond appropriately in context,” since “there is no fixed pattern of behavior and attitude characteristic of the good person in every circumstance” (p 49, emphasis his).

A proper and appropriate meting out of justice, for example, requires sensitivity to the complex context in which we’ve suffered a wrong, including an awareness of and respect for any power distribution in the relational dynamics (father to son, student to teacher, friend to enemy, employee to employer, et al., cf., pp 49-50). Moreover, believers must ensure there is no passion for vengeance in the pursuit of justice toward an oppressor. While the Jesus-follower is enjoined to pray for, love, and bless friend and foe, in no case did Jesus require nor did his life show the same response to everyone. Consider, for example, his treatment of his disciples and that of the religious leaders.

Lest Christ-followers embrace only abstract principles at the expense of the “concrete behavior” which Jesus demands, the next chapter swings the pendulum toward ritual. It illustrates that for Jesus and for Confucius, the “moral life is both characterized by spontaneity and facilitated by strict adherence to ritual” (p 64).

The burden of chapter 5, “Ritual” is this: How do we retain an appropriate measure of spontaneity demanded by the complexities of life while remaining tethered to those moral constraints of an authority that transcends self or society? On the one hand Jesus insisted upon the continued authority of God’s Law yet, on the other, showed that the fruit of obedience must come naturally from within one’s heart. “Natural.” that is, in the sense of “trained spontaneity” as illustrated in learning to play a musical instrument. The more one adheres to the strict rules of handling a musical instrument properly, the more one’s awkward behavior transforms into trained behavior.

Corrected behaviors facilitate progress in skill until it becomes “natural” for one to respond appropriately toward the goal of making music. Though a specific movement may not be perfectly executed as practiced, it is the practice of it that provides the framework from which to perform according to the need of the song. Likewise, the Christ-follower learns a skill from repeated execution and it becomes a natural response capable of adjustment according to the circumstances and complex context in which a moral challenge arises (pp 72ff).

A Summary Review of Confucius for Christians: What an Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ

Those behaviors that emerge from strict adherence to the demands of Jesus slowly mold and shape a lifestyle that could not have emerged from a heart immersed in the customized, privatized, individualism that so often characterizes the West. In fact, a vigorous individualism becomes a kind of prison that bounds one to live life only from within one's passions and desires. What is lost for the person only listening to the self is that freedom to be spontaneous or creative, since that person only has the vantage point from within one's self. What Jesus offers is a "spontaneous fluidity of loving response to God and neighbor" that is executed from a "perfectly adapted motion for the particular circumstance" (p 77). "Trained spontaneity," thus, gives birth to the art of living and the Christ-follower has the creative means of expressing the Jesus Way.

The final chapter 6 titled "Sam" is named after a fictitious person who illustrates "a particular life in pursuit of the Confucian Christian ideals" (p 83). His failure to "attend to the roots" in healthy relationships of the home results in unhealthy relationships at work, church, neighborhood, and elsewhere. Through exposure to Confucianism in a church-related apologetics class and a series of change in location and jobs, Sam eventually finds his way back to his Christian faith. He learns to read his Bible differently and realizes the beauty of "trained spontaneity" as taught by Confucius and Jesus. Rather than seeing Christian maturity as a finely-tuned articulation of Christian doctrine, Sam learns the value of moving a conversation forward by building on what has already been said in the Scriptures (ritual) and finding creative ways of expressing his faith that spontaneously adapts to the needs of others in his life.

Confucius for Christians is a fine read and highly recommended. It shows the value of balance in the Christian life and provides a safe harbor for those who are weary of all the angst and negativity toward alternative religions that so often characterize Christian apologetics.